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# *Pejoratives and Testimonial Injustice: Preci*

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*Testimonial injustice is a hot topic in social epistemology. My own work is concerned with pejoratives (in particular, gender pejoratives for women), so in this paper I wish to connect them with such injustice. So, my present topic is testimonial injustice perpetrated by the serious use of pejoratives, in particular, gender pejoratives. It combines two strands: on the one hand, the work on testimonial injustice; and here I shall rely on Miranda Fricker's work, and on the other hand, my own central area of interest, (gender) pejoratives.*

**Keywords:** Gender pejoratives, testimonial injustice, linguistic injustice, stereotypes.

## 1. *Introduction*

In this work I try to connect testimonial injustice to gender pejoratives. In order to that I first briefly explain what pejoratives are. Then I move on to explaining Fricker's view on prejudice and stereotypes. I would like to show how Fricker's idea of collective social imagination is indeed very plausible and how stereotypes and prejudice are a normal part of it. These stereotypes and prejudice typically activate themselves when one tries to assess someone's credibility or trustworthiness and the activation of stereotypes and prejudice happens even if one is not aware of it. Now, I think that language is an important part of socialization and can increase the testimonial injustice. Since stereotypes and prejudice have the main role (as Fricker showed in her book *Epistemic Injustice*) in the process of attributing credibility to the speaker, or in other words, sexist prejudice decrease the credibility assigned to women, I try to show how the use of pejoratives can develop and sustain stereotypes and prejudice and thus influence our perception of the speaker. Furthermore, not only can pejoratives have an influence on our percep-

tion of the speaker but their permanent and systematic use has an influence on the systematic underestimation of credibility of certain groups of people (and consequently on their self-esteem and other intellectual virtues). In this precis I am particularly interested in how pejoratives influence the underestimation of credibility of women and I think that the use of pejoratives can indirectly and directly increase the testimonial injustice in the second step and how they perpetuate the testimonial injustice done to women. So, the question is how should we cope with such phenomena in our society? In the last part I try to give a possible answer to that question by presenting and pointing out possible virtues that we should have in order to avoid the use of pejoratives and I also try to give an answer to the question about the testimonial sensibility that we should have in order to avoid the use of pejoratives. Fricker claims that we should develop testimonial sensibility and I point out virtues that can help in that process. The idea is that one possible virtue that we may want to nurture is the love of knowledge so that we could avoid the non-culpable mistakes. Another virtue that we should have in order to avoid pejoratives as hearers of such language is the virtue of autonomy, and, finally, it is evident that it would be virtuous not to use pejoratives and that users of pejoratives obviously have testimonial insensibility instead of testimonial sensibility as Fricker argues in her book *Epistemic Injustice*.

## 2. *Pejoratives*

There is a wide array of pejorative words, but here I am concerned with those that are gender related, namely sexist pejoratives for women. Some of the examples of sexist pejoratives are English pejoratives: *bitch*, *cunt*, *whore* and *witch*; and their Croatian synonyms would be: *kuja*, *pička*, *kurva* and *vještica*.

So, let me briefly give a semantic analysis of the word *whore*. There are three meanings of the word *whore*.

The first one is the literal meaning where the word *whore* means prostitute. A prostitute sells her body for money which is considered to be bad and immoral.

The second meaning refers to a promiscuous woman who sleeps with a lot of men, but the reference to money is no longer a part of the meaning (she, unlike a prostitute, does not “sell” her body), so we can say that this second meaning of the word *whore* is a half dead metaphor. But, the qualities that did stay represented within the very meaning (sense) of the word *whore* are such that the woman who the speaker is referring to by the term in question is bad and immoral because she sleeps with a lot of men. So, something negative and devaluating is rooted in the very meaning of the word *whore*. When someone calls a woman a *whore* what is rooted in the meaning of the word is that she is bad, immoral, dirty... So, when someone uses the word *whore* to refer to a woman, in its presumed extension it means that she will sleep with almost anyone (promiscuous behavior), that she is easy, etc.

Used in its third meaning the word *whore* can apply to “anyone who sells out their principles” (Hughes 2006: 493). So, it does not need to refer to women, it can also refer to politicians, for example. This third meaning of the word *whore* has no sexual reference. However, it does mean that the target is corrupt or immoral because of selling their principles.

Recently, a new meaning of the word *whore* has arisen. It can be classified as the fourth meaning of the word (*reference of which is the Urban dictionary*). It refers to a person that is doing something excessively and repeatedly which is very annoying. The link to the literal meaning of prostitute is obviously lost (as it is in the third meaning), but we can find the link with promiscuity (even though the sexual component is lost) because promiscuity can signify repetition which is considered to be annoying and bad.

The most interesting meaning of the word *whore* for the discussion here is the second one. In the corresponding case what the speaker intends to do is to degrade the target (a woman whom he refers to as a *whore*).

Now I want to give a background on socialization and stereotypes, and also, a short overview of empirical material on stereotypes which I will then connect with Fricker’s theorizing, and, also, address the issue of defining stereotypes.

### 3. *Miranda Fricker’s outline of testimonial injustice*

I am relying on Fricker’s idea of testimonial injustice which she claims to be a normal part of the discourse, unfortunately. Here, we need some background, so I briefly summarize her main points that I find useful for my project. Before Fricker goes on to explain what exactly testimonial injustice is, she turns to the idea of identity power which impacts our discursive relations.

#### 3.1. *Power and testimonial exchange*

Fricker explains that there is “at least one form of social power which requires not only practical social co-ordination but also an *imaginative* social co-ordination” (Fricker 2007: 14). This is where Fricker presents us with an idea of identity power:

There can be operations of social power which are dependent upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity – conceptions alive in the collective social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on (Fricker 2007: 14).

Fricker gives an example of gender acting as one arena of identity power and stresses how an *active* use of gender power can be when a man uses his identity as a man to influence woman’s actions. The example that Fricker presents us with is the case where a man silences

a woman by emphasizing that she cannot possibly be right about her suspicions about the possible murderer because, as he explains, all of her suspicions are only based on female intuition as opposed to facts (Fricker 2007). Also, identity power can be structural or agential.

But, how does identity power influence testimonial injustice. Here comes the thought that will be central in the sequel. Fricker writes:

I shall argue that identity power is an integral part of the mechanism of testimonial exchange, because of the need for hearers to use social stereotypes as heuristic in their spontaneous assessment of their interlocutor's credibility. This use of stereotypes may be entirely proper, or it may be misleading, depending on the stereotype. Notably, if the stereotype embodies a prejudice that works against the speaker, then two things follow: there is an epistemic dysfunction in the exchange – the hearer makes an unduly deflated judgment of the speaker's credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result; and the hearer does something ethically bad—the speaker is wrongfully undermined in her capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007: 16–17).

Now, prejudice can result either in *credibility excess* (when “a speaker is given more credibility than she otherwise would have”) or in *credibility deficit* (when “a speaker receives less credibility than she otherwise would have”) (Fricker 2007). However, what will be of most interest here is the credibility deficit which can lead to testimonial injustice. In the cases of testimonial injustice the ethical poison “must derive from some ethical poison in the judgment of the hearer... The proposal I am heading for is that the ethical poison in question is that of *prejudice*” (Fricker 2007: 22).

This brings us to the possible link with pejoratives, namely the importance of the stereotype. I want to point out the connection between gender pejoratives and the way they can indirectly increase the testimonial injustice done to women and that is already part of the imaginative social co-ordination.

### 3.2 *Prejudice and stereotypes*

First, how should we define stereotypes? Fricker is wisely not prejudging the badness of pejoratives: so, since she is using the word stereotypes neutrally, she will need a broader definition. Indeed, she defines stereotypes as “widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes” (Fricker 2007: 30). When defined like that “stereotyping entails a cognitive commitment to some empirical generalization about a given social group (‘women are intuitive’)” (Fricker 2007: 31) and that generalization can be more or less strong.

She goes on to say that we can suppose that an identity prejudice is at work in the stereotype. In that case we have to understand that a stereotype can be just a non-culpable mistake (an ‘honest mistake’). Arplay (2003) gives a good example of a boy who has a belief that women are not capable of abstract thinking, at least not as men are. Since he lives in a community where all the evidence he could have gathered

suggests that women are indeed not capable of such thinking, we can say that he made an honest mistake. If the boy was to come across some counter-evidence and he does not change his belief than we can say that he does something ethically and epistemically bad (Fricker 2007).

In these cases there exists a negative identity prejudice which has an ethically bad motivation behind it, so the identity prejudice that Fricker is focused on and that I will also be examining are “prejudices with a negative valence held against people *qua* social type” (Fricker 2007: 35).

Therefore, Fricker gives a definition of what negative identity-prejudicial stereotype is: “A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment” (Fricker 2007: 35).

Now, Fricker goes on to say that identity prejudice “distorts the hearer’s perception of the speaker” (Fricker 2007: 36). To clarify exactly how that can happen Fricker takes the explanation of the idea of a stereotype proposed by Walter Lippmann (1965). He “described social stereotypes as ‘pictures in our head’” (Fricker 2007: 37). These can linger on in our psychology and affect the hearer’s patterns of judgment even when our belief system is not in accordance with this. An example given by Fricker on this point is of a feminist who doesn’t take a word of her female colleagues seriously.

Fricker takes this (the stealth mode of social stereotypes which persist in our psychology despite ourselves) to be evidence or at least support the idea that testimonial injustice happens all the time. She agrees with Shklar (1990) that injustice is a normal social baseline, and she thinks that also testimonial injustice is a normal part of the discourse. She also emphasizes the wrong that is done to someone when treated in this way (an ethical wrong that can be damaging) which is still viewed as something trivial (Fricker 2007).

Fricker then moves on to further develop this point. She claims that testimonial injustice can do little or no harm but that it can also be seriously harmful when it is systematic. Fricker recognizes epistemic harm where “knowledge that would be passed on to a hearer is not received” (Fricker 2007: 43). However, Fricker is more concerned with the immediate wrong that the hearer does to the speaker. She emphasizes that the ability to give knowledge to others is significant for human beings. So, when someone suffers a testimonial injustice they are not only degraded as knowers but also as humans. Considering this aspect of harm, she concludes: “The harm will take different forms, but they are both cases of identity-prejudicial exclusion from the community of epistemic trust, and so they both belong to the same category of injustice” (Fricker 2007: 45–46).

Fricker also discusses the secondary aspect of harm where she explores two categories; practical and epistemic dimension of harm. To explain what practical dimension of harm would be she presents an example of a testimonial injustice in a courtroom where one can be found guilty. The second category is again that of an epistemic harm where:

The recipient of a one-off testimonial injustice may lose confidence in his belief, or in his judgment for it, so that he ceases to satisfy the conditions for knowledge; or, alternatively, someone with a background experience of persistent testimonial injustice may lose confidence in her general intellectual abilities to such an extent that she is genuinely hindered in her educational or other intellectual development (Fricker 2007: 47–48).

All of this can have an impact on the formation of our identity if, of course, the testimonial injustice is persistent and systematic (we can imagine a woman interested in politics but living in a society that doesn't allow women to vote; in such a case, she is to lose an essential part of herself by not being a part of a trustful conversation). One (in our example a woman) may also come to resemble the stereotype working against her (she may internalize the stereotype and start to believe that she is indeed inferior and act according to it).

I would like to focus on the harm done to women in our Western liberal society thus emphasizing that our society is indeed still patriarchal, even if we are not so keen to admit it. And there is a connection between the language we use to speak about women and the way language can indirectly (and sometimes directly) increase the testimonial injustice done to women. Also, I would like to focus on importance of virtues that we should have in order to avoid the use of pejoratives and try to answer the question what is the sensibility that we should train in order to avoid them.

#### 4. *Pejoratives and testimonial injustice*

By calling a woman a *whore* one undermines her dignity by not treating her as an equal member of the society (remember the brief analysis that is offered in section 2). When using such sexist speech the goal of the speaker is to degrade. So, the (intended) perlocutionary effect is to degrade the target and to treat her as less valuable than other members of the society. It is worth noting that it does not matter for the woman if she is physically present at the time of the utterance. The degrading of the target happens even if the target is not present and even if there is no face-to-face confrontation. The term *whore* is equally offensive for a woman whether she is present at the time of the utterance or not. Also, when the speaker uses such terms his intended perlocutionary effect is for the hearers to agree with him, too. It is, of course, clear that the use of pejoratives is not itself a testimonial injustice (there may be some similar consequences such as undermining a woman's self-esteem, which is also the result of systematic skepticism towards women's credibility, but it isn't a testimonial injustice in

itself). Now, the question is how does using pejoratives contribute to testimonial injustice happening to women?<sup>1</sup>

We can take an example of the speaker using pejoratives (the word *whore*, for example) and being in a position of power<sup>2</sup> in which case we can only imagine the scope of the harm being done. Suppose that an executive director of a certain company is talking to his young employees and that he refers to his (and their) female colleagues as *whores* or *bitches*. As I already explained the (intended) perlocutionary effect is that the hearers agree with him. Since the speaker is in a position of power and if the hearers are already mentally contaminated, it is plausible to assume that the pejorative can increase the already existent identity-prejudicial stereotype (which is, as Fricker explained, present in the collective social imagination). It can also be the case (a worst case scenario) that the speaker receives credibility excess in which case the perlocutionary effect on the speakers to agree with the hearer is even greater. But, in any case pejoratives can, as we have seen, increase the already existent identity-prejudicial stereotype thus indirectly increasing the testimonial injustice done to women. After all, who would trust a *whore*?<sup>3</sup> There are cases where using a pejorative can even directly increase testimonial injustice, for example, in cases when uttering: "Shut up, you bitch". Also, to add to Fricker's claim where she described identity-prejudicial stereotype as an association

<sup>1</sup> I am here exploring the connection between pejoratives and testimonial injustice. However, it seems that pejoratives can inflict an even greater epistemic harm. When using hate speech (for example, calling someone a whore) the person who is the target of such speech can internalize all the bad things that are meant/ implied by the expression in question and thus hate speech may influence the very character of a person (one referred to as a Nigger can indeed start acting lazy, stupid and so on). This very interesting effect of hate speech is something to explore in the future due to the limitation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> By the term "position of power" I mean both the identity power identified by Fricker and the economical power exercised through the person being an executive of a certain company.

<sup>3</sup> Now, let's imagine a speaker who calls his friend *a whore*, but who is an epistemically disciplined person and he would never use a person's being *a whore* to determine her testimonial worth. However, the people who hear that comment do take her less seriously. It seems that the utterer is not guilty of testimonial injustice, so the question remains: who is guilty of what? (This comment was made by Johanna Schnurr at a conference in Dubrovnik 2014).

So, in this particular case we can speculate that the speaker is not directly guilty of testimonial injustice since, as we have established, he does not undermine the person's testimonial worth, but he certainly is guilty of *indirectly* increasing testimonial injustice since he is using a pejorative in a certain context. This is more of a consequentialist view where the person is contributing in perpetuating the society where certain groups of people can be degraded by using such pejoratives, and consequently indirectly increasing the testimonial injustice because of using such a pejorative to describe a person and he /she should be aware of its effect on the hearers. The only case where the speaker cannot be considered culpable is a case already described by Fricker where a speaker only has evidence that support his prejudicial belief.

which “embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment” (Fricker 2007: 35), it seems that pejoratives create a context where one is prone to resist any counter-evidence that may occur.

Now, let’s note here that there are certain pejoratives which can increase credibility<sup>4</sup> but in this paper I am interested only in sexist pejoratives for women which, I think, usually lower credibility. So, when calling someone a *bitch* or a *whore*, you actually want to degrade (remember that we are concerned with the literal, serious use of pejoratives as opposed to appropriated uses or just mentions—quotes) and if you succeed then the person would not be taken seriously in the future, so you would actually lower her credibility by degrading her. It seems fair to assume that these kinds of pejoratives would attack sincerity more than they would attack knowledge. For example, you could trust a person (who was referred to as a *whore*) when she says that it is raining outside. But, you wouldn’t trust her when she would claim to be in love. Although, in my opinion, it also seems fair to assume that calling someone a *whore* or referring to them by some other (gender) pejorative would actually lower their knowledge-status in the sense that they wouldn’t be taken seriously in, for example, the workplace (if you think someone is a *whore*, this will probably screen off any considerations of qualities such as being knowledgeable or an expert, and also raise doubts that she got a good status due to her expertise at work suggesting that she got where she is by other, less respectable means).

Another point that I would like to draw is the fact that, when talking about sexist pejoratives for women, the important thing to note is that they go with sexist stereotypes about women. These kinds of pejoratives are interesting because they carry rich content (the negative valence is rooted in the meaning), which means that one word can carry a lot of power and using them to degrade another person is certainly more appealing to most people than using another form of communication (for example than just saying “She is promiscuous and that is bad and immoral”). Because of this my opinion is that we can talk about *linguistic injustice* which can happen when somebody uses a pejorative to refer to (a) wom(a)en. So, when calling someone a *whore*, what you mean is that the person is promiscuous and that is bad, she has a loose moral, she’s dirty, and you probably shouldn’t get romantically involved with her. In general, for a pejorative to inflict linguistic injustice (and to degrade) it would have to carry a stereotype in its content which, I think, sexist pejoratives do.

Now, the next question to be asked is how to cope with such phenomena? Above all, if the conclusion is that the serious use of pejoratives should be avoided, how should this be done? In previous sections

<sup>4</sup> Pejoratives such as *nerd* or *swat*, which was pointed out by T. Williamson at The Linguistics and Philosophy conference in Dubrovnik 2014.



I have argued that pejoratives sustain an unjust system by indirectly increasing testimonial injustice. Now, one way of dealing with pejoratives is to have certain virtues in order to avoid the use of pejoratives; this might help to answer the question about the testimonial sensibility that we should develop in order to avoid pejoratives.

It is important to note that one can use pejoratives and make a non-culpable mistake or one can use them merely as provocation or sarcasm. One can make a non-culpable mistake and a good example is given by Arpaly (in Fricker 2007: 33) where she describes a boy who doesn't have any access to knowledge and therefore it is understandable if he thinks that women are somehow inferior to men. But that is why it is important to have the virtue of love of knowledge and as Roberts and Wood explain: "The virtue of love of knowledge packages a desire for knowledge, along with the sense of the relative importance of truths, and thus which truths merit pursuit. The social side of the love of knowledge includes a willingness and ability to convey relevant truths to others" (Roberts and Wood 2007: 165). So, non-culpable mistakes can happen but if we have a virtue of love of knowledge then as our knowledge grows, the non-culpable mistakes will be fewer.

The worst kind of use of pejoratives would be to use them in order to spread and deepen the injustice (as I have emphasized before, this use of the pejorative and this range of a typical pejorative is of interest in this paper). In order to avoid this we, *as hearers* of such speech, should have the virtue of autonomy and intellectual autonomy disposes us to be appropriately dependent on others' intellectual guidance and achievements (Roberts and Woods 2007: 267). So, in order to reject the use of pejoratives in a hate-filled environment what we should have as a virtue is, I think, intellectual autonomy where we rely on ourselves. In that case we would not just agree with what the speaker who is using sexist speech is saying, so his intent (that we agree with him) would fail.

## 5. Conclusion

I tried to connect the idea of testimonial injustice with the theory of pejoratives. Here is my argument in a nutshell: one way of forming stereotypes is through language because language is an important part of socialization. If we use language to spread hatred (which is the case in using pejorative for degrading the target) then language becomes a harmful weapon. Therefore, pejoratives can indirectly (and directly) increase the testimonial injustice. I have also argued in favor of cultivating some virtues in order to avoid the use of pejoratives, but some things still have to be said about the users of pejoratives.

Thus, the question left unanswered is the question about the user(s) of pejoratives. We can say that the one that uses pejoratives did not engage in self-critical reflection and Fricker also notes that for a hearer to identify the impact of identity power in their credibility judgment, the hearers must also be alert to the impact the speaker's (and their own)

social identity may have on their credibility judgment. However as Fricker (2007) argues, it is not only the user of pejoratives who should engage in self-critical reflection, but also the hearers who should constantly question which prejudice may interfere in the discourse thus avoiding the lack of credibility they assign to the speaker. As noted earlier we all have unconscious processes and that is why this virtue is probably the most helpful one in assessing our own stereotypes and prejudice (even if we are not fully aware of all of our prejudice I think that this virtue can help develop our testimonial sensitivity<sup>5</sup>). Once we realize that we may have certain prejudice we can act in order to avoid them. Also, this virtue decreases the amount of non-culpable mistakes because it makes us constantly question possible prejudice that may influence the assessment of the credibility of the speaker. If one fails to engage in critical self-reflection then one also may fail to recognize the prejudice that is contaminating his belief system (Fricker 2007). As I have already pointed out, this virtue may apply to users of pejoratives because they should also question their belief system and, of course, change it if presented with counter-evidence. I think that the users of pejoratives (with the intent to degrade) do not possess the respect of the autonomy of others. Consider Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative which states that we should never treat humanity in another person merely as a means to an end. If we do so, we do not respect that person and we violate their autonomy because a person who is treated merely as a means to an end, instead of an end in themselves, cannot be autonomous. The user of pejoratives violates all of the above. It is clear that the user of pejoratives has not trained his/her testimonial sensibility (and the training of our testimonial sensibility is necessary if we were to comprise virtues needed to avoid pejoratives). Quite the opposite, the speaker has testimonial insensibility. It would be virtuous not to use pejoratives (if they are used to degrade).

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of testimonial sensibility as Fricker explains it is as follows: "Our idea of testimonial sensibility is an idea of a spontaneous critical sensitivity that is permanently in training and continuously adapting according to individual and collective experience" (Fricker 2007: 84).